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Letters to the Editor

Symbolic Protest

Since I'm a professor teaching on the East Coast north of the Potomac, maybe I rate Dean Rusk's label, "pseudo-intellectual." Anyhow, I could see the malaise gnawing at the writer of your Nov. 1 editorial "Students and Recruiters." He agonized that youngsters of Williams and Oberlin Colleges and at this state's university who oppose our hard line in Vietnam have obstructed recruiters from the CIA and Dow Chemical Co. in interviewing job applicants. Such demonstrators, he informs us, violate "the elementary principles of democracy" and resort to "physical force" to deprive their fellows of "their right to free speech." The protesters are we learn, using "totalitarian" standards which, if applied by our Government against themselves, would bring them "long prison terms." Strong language to sharpen painful issues.

Isn't it usually easy to overcome this minority's "physical force" by the far greater physical force of police and other agents backed by majority laws that defend our status quo? At most, do such demonstrators ever do more than momentarily disrupt the big wheels of society? As they move from quiet, verbal dissent into civil disobedience, do they or any of the rest of us imagine they will actually impede the war machine? Have we driven them to such tactics because most of the mass media do not give their side of the arguments a fair hearing? Could theirs be *symbolic acts*, a way to get heard, a now necessary means to get *The Washington Post* editorialist to condemn them—and so to raise questions we all have to answer?

One is: what are the CIA and various industrial recruiters doing on any campus in the first place? When and how and why did they move in? The demonstrators made no threat to manhandle or to choke the "free speech" of job-seekers if their interviews were held elsewhere than on the campus. Possibly the young radicals have a traditional and old-fashioned notion of college? Evidently their idea of an institution of higher learning challenges that held by *The Washington Post*.

If a university is predominantly a mere servant of the state, an arm of the Government, a branch of our industrial and business system, then its chief purpose is to produce specialists, precision-made and interchangeable parts, for our monstrous military-industrial complex; and we will have to silence, with if need be "long prison terms," those who refuse to conform. But if even in times like these a university stands for something else, for a quaint but anciently honorable thing called wisdom—if it aims to foster humanely educated citizens whose minds and hearts care about truth—then maybe we ought to listen a little more closely to these obstreperous youngsters. Quite a few of us "pseudo-intellectuals" suspect that the kids are asking some very uncomfortable questions.

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